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ABSTRACT

Healthy self-esteem is the yeast in the recipe of learning. Studies into the intellectual-emotional connections in the human brain show that the affective domain is the gateway to the cognitive domain and so effective ways to raise self-esteem, which are covered in this booklet, are an important component of education. The first part of the text explores the nature of self-esteem, asking what it is, how it is formed, what are its sources, and how self-esteem functions. Self-esteem is presented as the reputation we have with ourselves and it serves as both a barometer of confidence and as a rudder for navigating the waters of learning. Ways to connect the self and learning are explored in the next section, which also covers the difference between self-esteem and egotism, some causes of low self-esteem, and ways to protect, maintain, and enhance learners' self-esteem. A model, which offers strategies for increasing self-esteem, is offered along with suggestions for helping learners cope with damaged self-esteem, such as the importance of minimizing negatives. Ways to bolster self-esteem in the adult learner are also reviewed. (RJM)

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Raising Self-Esteem of Learners

Ross Van Ness

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Raising Self-Esteem of Learners

by
Ross Van Ness

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The Importance of Self-Esteem in Learning

A four-year-old told an inquiring pastor that he wanted to be "possible." When asked what he meant, he said, "My mother always says I'm 'impossible.' I want to be 'possible' when I grow up."

An adult learner confided, "I always wanted to get a college degree but was never sure I was capable."

Both comments illustrate the strength of self-concept as an affective catalyst of learning. Healthy self-esteem is the essential yeast in the recipe of learning. Regardless of age, the self-image a learner has facilitates or inhibits learning.

Traditionally, cognitive ability has been seen as the key factor in learning. But increased research into intellectual-emotional connections in the human brain shows that the affective domain is the gateway to the cognitive. Self-esteem is one of the most crucial aspects of the affect.

Self-Esteem Defined

Self-concept is the totality of how persons view themselves. It is composed of self-identity (who and what I believe I am), self-evaluation (how worthy and capable I believe I am), and self-ideal (what I would like to be or believe I should be). Each of these aspects affects the other, but self-evaluation most directly affects learning. Self-esteem draws from the internal view of capability, which is a kind of balance sheet of thoughts and feelings about oneself. It is the self-judg-

ing component of self-concept. Self-evaluation affects self-identity and guides a learner's aspirations, which in turn dictate what the learner will attempt.

Self-esteem is the reputation we have with ourselves. It serves as both a barometer of confidence and a rudder for navigating the waters of learning. If the self-evaluation is positive and confidence is high, then the learner tends to learn more easily and to persist through difficulties. Conversely, if self-esteem is low, the learner approaches learning more hesitantly and will be quicker to abandon the effort when obstacles occur.

Formation of Self-Esteem

Individuals may have genetic tendencies to respond more readily to certain stimuli, but self-esteem is learned, not inborn. A major task of the newborn is to work out a context for existence. Forming a "picture of self" begins in infancy and is a product of the interaction between the newborn and those around him or her.

From birth onward, humans continually seek responses from those around them and then interpret that feedback in personal ways. Interpretation is important to bear in mind, because children — especially young children — often are excellent observers but poor interpreters. They interpret events and messages in ways that *make sense to them*, rather than understanding the input as an adult might intend it.

This continuous, complex internal process of deriving meaning about one's self and one's relationship to the external world leads to the formation of self-concept. Self-esteem emerges from the combination of the messages a child receives, the experiences he or she encounters, and how each of these is interpreted.

Sources of Self-Esteem

In working with children, it is important to remember that the capacity to observe and make inferences develops more rapidly than the ability to reason. Humans do not operate in an identity void. Rather,

they function in the context of their perceptions of themselves, in relation to their surroundings, and as a reflection of others. Young persons begin to establish a belief about who they are, as well as how effectively they are functioning. Hence the vital role of the affective domain, particularly during the concept-forming first years of life. Much of an adult's basic self-concept is formed between birth and age six.

Unfortunately, humans often see the world in negative terms. That is, negative events get attention and are dealt with sharply, while positive events are ignored or taken for granted. Shad Helmstetter in his book, *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself*, estimates that young children receive 10 times more negative than positive messages. The bombardment of "don'ts," "can'ts," and "shouldn'ts"; "bad boy" and "naughty girl"; and other words and actions that criticize and embarrass children far outweighs supportive, encouraging, and complimentary messages. For many school children, comments about errors and failures are internalized as negative reflections on their ability, rather than as productive feedback and a "normal" part of learning.

Expectations also are significant. Whether they are spoken or merely implied, they can enhance or diminish learning. For example, if Learner A sees that Learner B is expected to achieve more, then Learner A may view himself as less capable than Learner B. That perception is then realized when Learner A performs less capably than Learner B. This "self-fulfilling prophesy" has been widely researched. The literature on expectations is clear: Learners tend to achieve at the level expected by the significant individuals in their lives. For young children, these individuals are their parents and caregivers; for school-age learners, they also are their teachers.

This does not mean all learners are capable of achieving every learning goal or performing at exactly the same level. Rather, it means that the *learner* should discover his or her own limits.

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How Self-Esteem Functions

Self-esteem can act as both a rudder and a propeller in the learning process, moving learners to acquire knowledge and understanding in positive ways. But if self-esteem is low or damaged, it also can delay or diminish learning. A key tool for teachers is to help the learner differentiate general ability to learn from the ability to master a particular skill or discipline.

Individuals vary in talent and interest. Some are gifted in one area but experience difficulty in another; others are talented in several areas but have no special aptitude in any particular field. However, some learners experience difficulty in mastering a given skill and then generalize that they are not capable learners. In these instances, the importance of self-esteem is most evident. A crucial task of teachers is to help students recognize and activate their ability to learn — indeed, to learn how to learn. Also essential is to help the learner separate lack of ability from lack of effort or persistence.

Many people operate on "other-esteem," rather than self-esteem. Students seek continual feedback on how well they are doing. They, like almost everyone else, look to others in order to gauge their success or failure. Yet many learners get little or no positive feedback on their efforts while receiving heavy doses of criticism. Unless learners feel secure in their ability to learn (a measure of high self-esteem), they may allow the perception of failure to become a self-fulfilling expectation.

Self-esteem also is fragile. Events of daily living have a direct bearing on self-concept. Positive events (or successes) tend to raise self-esteem, while negative events pull it down. This "barometer effect" — linking positive and negative occurrences to self-esteem — combined with the ups and downs of living keeps most individuals on an "emotional yo-yo" regarding their feelings of self-worth and confidence. As one humorist observed: "Most of us are like the man who worked for the public opinion firm — 24% of me believes I'm capable, 34% of me believes I'm not capable, and 42% of me is undecided!"

These factors translate into the internal conversations that most people carry on. Through self-talk, individuals continually assign meaning to events, situations, and results. Few students — probably few adults — fully realize what Earl Nightingale once called the "Greatest Secret" — that we become what we think about the most. Thus the challenge for teachers is to help students not only to realize outwardly their ability to learn, but also to shape their internal messages by interpreting the feedback they receive in ways that enhance rather than diminish self-esteem.

Connecting the Self and Learning

The term *self-esteem* comes from a Greek word meaning "reverence for self." While some people equate self-esteem with egotism, most recognize that the two concepts are entirely distinct. Those who have thought about the power of self-esteem understand that unless individuals respect and appreciate themselves, they have little to offer to others.

The effects of other people's views and actions on an individual's self-concept have been recognized for centuries, but the psychological dimensions have been given serious attention only since the middle of the 19th century. Freud's concept of the ego-heightened awareness of the self and the work of William James at the turn of the century expanded the popular realization that the self is determined by personal choices and as a result of the influences that affect those choices.

In 1902, sociologist Charles Horton Cooley developed the theory that one's ideas of self are significantly affected by what one imagines that others think of him or her. This theory was enlarged by George Mead in 1925, when he studied the significance of family members on self-concept. The view of self was tied directly to learning by the Rosenthal studies in California during the 1960s, where randomly chosen teachers were told that randomly selected groups of students had high or low ability. The findings in these studies showed that students tended to perform in accordance with teacher expectations and treatment (the self-fulfilling prophecy).

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Self-esteem, in most students, "mirrors" the appraisals of others, in particular parents and teachers. Teachers' views clearly affect learners' achievement. Positive appraisals over an extended time tend to increase the level of learning. Prolonged or consistent negative appraisals tend to lower learning achievement.

In truth, most learners receive mixed messages, which causes confusion and anxiety that can interfere with learning. Dichotomous or inconsistent messages are termed a "double-bind" by psychologists and require that the learner reconcile the contradictory messages in some way. Usually, one view becomes dominant in the learner's self-evaluation. Yet even if a positive view is selected as the "correct" view, learning may not be as high as with more consistently positive appraisals. When evaluative feedback is ambiguous or contradictory, the learner's motives, needs, and interests often have an increased influence on which cues are selected and internalized.

Learning is growth — intellectual, physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and combinations of these. To grow requires experimentation, exploration, investigation, and practice. We need risks and challenges. But learning does not happen smoothly and easily. Along the way, there are missteps and failures, however temporary. For students, discovering how to manage that uneven progress realistically and objectively is as much a part of learning as are content and skills. The healthy procedure is to separate information and personal insights from the opinions of others — and from their own critical self-messages.

Every aspect of the learning process has the capacity to damage, maintain, or increase self-esteem. Because the affect of each instructor-learner interaction occurs internally, it is difficult to assess the effect of these interactions. Thus the quality of interaction during learning becomes like the quality of the air we breathe — invisible, yet vital to our ability to function in a healthy manner.

The skilled teacher functions as a learning coach or learning facilitator. A truly fine athletic coach has the ability to help an athlete become better than either one thought the athlete could be. Similarly, a

fine learning coach not only refrains from placing limits on the learner but also offers support and challenge through two types of feedback: 1) compliments for specific progress or success and 2) encouraging suggestions to overcome difficulty or nonsuccess. This substitutes constructive assistance for criticism and treats failure as success yet to be achieved. When serious obstacles are encountered, the approach most healthy to self-esteem is supportive guidance, not a focus on what is incorrect.

In an age of instant gratification, it also is vital to help the learner realize that self-esteem is linked to sustained effort, persistence, and tenacity. Building self-esteem is not achieved merely by helping learners "feel good about themselves," but by helping them persist through difficulty.

The Difference Between Self-Esteem and Egotism

High self-esteem should not to be confused with egotism, or self-centeredness. By definition, self-esteem is a level of healthy regard for one's self. A person with healthy (therefore, high) self-esteem has no need to be pompous, arrogant, or vain.

Egotism is propelled by low self-esteem. Egotists feel a need to make themselves larger or more important. Egotists rely on "other-esteem" to build their feelings of self-worth. Cartoonist Gary Trudeau delivered one of his most acerbic quips when he had one *Doonesbury* comic-strip character say of another, "His humility would fill up a room." Engaging in such self-aggrandizement is egotism. Individuals with high self-esteem have no need to build themselves up in the eyes of others, because "other-esteem" is not important to them.

However, not all persons with low or damaged self-esteem are egotistical. Charlie Brown in the *Peanuts* comic strip is an archetype of the child with low self-esteem, yet he quietly copes as best he can. On the other hand, Lucy, in the same comic strip, also has self-esteem problems, but her compensation strategies are aggressiveness and belligerent egotism.

Some children are taught that it is wrong to think well of themselves. This confusion of healthy self-appreciation and confidence with egotism can leave a child feeling guilty about feeling good. False pride, conceit, and self-centeredness do exist; however, they are not the result — or even a byproduct — of a healthy sense of self-worth and confidence. Rather, they result from twisted efforts to shore up feelings of inadequacy or inner deficiency.

Causes of Low Self-Esteem

Children engage in a huge amount of informal learning before becoming involved in formal learning, and so a learning pattern or style usually develops in infancy and early childhood. Learning-related problems often are rooted in the learning style and are interpreted by the learner in ways that shape the learner's self-esteem and influence future learning.

A person of any age may come to the learning situation with self-esteem that has been damaged to some extent. Because of the fragile nature of self-esteem, both children and adults with apparently solid, positive self-esteem may encounter trauma that lowers self-worth or confidence. It also is possible for the learning experience itself to adversely affect self-esteem. The learning task, the instructor, the experiences during learning, and emotionally charged events unrelated to the learning that occur at the same time as the learning all may affect an individual's sense of self-efficacy — either positively or negatively.

Experiences that damage self-esteem include:

Repeated negative evaluation by others. When a child (or adult) is repeatedly told that he or she is dumb, stupid, slow, or other negative descriptor, that individual's subconscious begins to believe the statement, regardless of its validity. Overhearing a statement such as, "Freddy doesn't do well in school," may be interpreted by Freddy as, "I am not capable of learning," especially if he hears the message more than once or from other people who are significant in his life.

Severe or repeated criticism. Hearing that learning results are "not good enough" or "below average" can damage self-worth and confidence. If a child is told, "You are not doing as well as you are capable of doing," the message may be interpreted not as, "I am not working hard enough," but as, "I am not capable of learning." The result is not motivation to learn, but its opposite.

Negative humor, put-downs, and "barbed kidding." Each of these is, in reality, criticism cloaked in levity. While the intent may be merely to "get a laugh," this type of humor often lowers the self-worth of its object.

Mistakes, errors, or "failures." Because learning requires exploring, experimenting, investigating, practicing, and "trying things," mistakes, errors, and temporary failures (successes yet to be achieved) are normal and indeed necessary. Yet, these "bumps in the road of learning" often are interpreted, either by persons important to the learner or by the learner, as indicators of low ability, with an accompanying drop in self-confidence.

Embarrassment. Whenever a person interacts with others, the potential for embarrassment exists. When it does occur, it frequently causes searing self-deprecation or self-blame.

Self-messages that others determine one's self-worth. Because "other-esteem" seems so natural and is so pervasive, self-talk that bases personal worth on the views of others often lowers self-esteem, particularly when external evaluations are negative.

Combinations of the above. Rarely does a damaging self-esteem experience occur in isolation. Errors are followed by criticism. Negative humor is likely to be linked to embarrassment. And negative events are likely to induce negative self-talk.

How an individual interprets negative messages, events, and experiences is critical. If the negatives are decoded as opportunities for learning and growth, or as lessons offered by the process of living, then self-esteem is not lowered by them. Indeed, it may be raised, as the individual takes personal control over his or her feelings and takes personal responsibility for actions and choices.

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Part of the teacher's task is to help students realize that the choice of interpretation and the assignment of meaning to negative events is a personal, internal process. Each individual must be accountable for his or her own thoughts and actions. No one can control the actions or judgments of others.

On the other hand, students and teachers can control to varying degrees the circumstances, events, and conditions of learning. Often, they can influence external events to better manage the positives and negatives. Like guiding a raft through a swift current, such management requires vigilance and hard work, and the journey still may seem almost uncontrollable. But the effort may keep the raft afloat.

Protecting, Maintaining, and Enhancing Learners' Self-Esteem

Students bring varying levels of self-esteem to a learning situation. And the self-esteem varies not only among individuals but also within the individual, depending on the student's past successes, prior feedback, skill at dealing with difficulties, and other factors.

The role of the teacher is to challenge students while helping them maintain and enhance their self-esteem. Successful learning that is recognized and acknowledged automatically will increase students' feelings of self-worth. The teacher's challenge is to protect and enhance self-esteem when the lessons are difficult and learning is less successful.

It has been well-documented that high expectations are vital to high achievement. High expectations must be held by both the teacher and the learner. However, high expectations are relative. The teacher must understand that the goals that are set and how progress toward those goals is measured affect how students view themselves and their competence as learners. This has an effect on self-esteem and the person's future learning.

A simple, useful tool to use when setting learning goals is the acronym, SMART. All goals should be Specific, Measurable,

Attainable, Relevant, and tied to a reasonable Time frame for accomplishment. Each of these characteristics is important, but whether the students view the goal as *attainable* has the greatest effect on self-esteem. Goals that are too high are discouraging; students may feel "defeated" before they begin or abandon the project early. Goals that are too low breed lethargy and boredom.

Whether a goal is generally attainable is an unimportant perception; the goal must be seen as personally attainable by the affected student. For example, the memory expert who repeats the names of 200 people he has just met and then says, "You, too, can do this," might — as a teacher — say, "You soon will be able to recall the names of ten persons and, with practice, can expand that number many times." The teacher must establish the learning goal in such a way that each student can see the goal as personally attainable.

In addition to attainable goals, a teacher can protect, maintain, and enhance learner self-esteem by:

- Expressing optimistic confidence in the student's learning potential;
- Striving to kindle a strong desire and inner drive to learn;
- Involving the learner in setting goals;
- Treating difficulties and set-backs as a natural part of learning;
- Providing encouragement and support and remaining optimistic in the face of difficulties;
- Treating failure as temporary, not terminal;
- Recognizing and praising learning progress and specific achievements;
- Providing specific assistance to overcome problems;
- Objectively addressing problems, rather than being judgmental;
- Comparing progress to the learner's own past level, not to the levels of others; and
- Focusing discipline on negative behaviors, not the individual as a person.

Admittedly, many factors apart from self-esteem affect the level of learning, such as peer influence (especially during the teen years), complexity of the learning task, instructor skill and imagination, learning conditions, learner physical and emotional health, environmental distractions, learner interest or desire, reading skill, technology and materials available, level of learning stress, accessibility of learning support systems, home conditions, parental support, and a myriad of other considerations. Yet each of these other factors has some relationship to self-esteem. Because the view of "self" is composed of everything we perceive ourselves to be, as well as everything that happens to us, nearly every aspect of learning directly or indirectly affects our self-esteem.

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A Model for Increasing Self-Esteem

Learners continually receive four types of messages that affect self-esteem:

Outside Positive
Outside Negative
Inside Positive
Inside Negative

Outside positive messages are messages from others that tend to build self-esteem. *Inside positive* messages are positive self-talk that have the same or greater potential to build self-esteem. *Outside negative* messages, such as criticism or ridicule, tend to lower self-esteem. *Inside negative* messages are negative self-talk.

Outside messages cannot be controlled; they must be managed. Inside messages are controllable, though not easily. Inside messages often come as a result of outside messages.

As positive messages, both outside and inside, increase, it is more likely that negative messages will be decreased or given less importance. With increased self-esteem, some negative messages may even be regarded as neutral. But only the individual can determine what messages are positive, negative, or neutral.

Ultimately, the most important of the four message types is the inside positive. Without self-affirmation and supportive self-talk, outside positives may be useless, because they are rejected in the internal eval-

uative process. A Persian proverb states: "A well is useless if it must be filled from the outside." Thus, just as a well must have its own source of water, so an individual must have an internal source of positives.

In *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself*, Shad Helmstetter identifies four levels of self-talk. The first level is the negative level, consisting of such messages as "I can't. . . ." "I'm not. . . ." "I always foul up," and similar phrases. Helmstetter recommends that this level be extinguished by replacing it with one of the three higher levels. He points out that the human mind can process only one thought at a time. By displacing negative self-talk and substituting more positive messages, students can learn to plant healthy seeds of belief in themselves.

The second level of self-talk is the conditional level, composed of such messages as "I'd like to . . ." "I wish I could . . ." "I need to . . ." "I should . . ." and so on. This level of self-talk needs to be finished or completed with messages of "and I can" or "and I will." If the task seems overwhelming or beyond present understanding, supplemental phrases might include: "and I'll find a way" or "I'll give it everything I've got."

The third level of self-talk is the affirmation level. The messages are, "I can. . . ." "I'm able to. . . ." "I no longer. . . ." and so on. This level needs to be supported, increased, and established as the norm, crowding out negative thoughts and messages.

The fourth level of self-talk is the confident, self-assured level. Key phrases include, "I have become. . . ." "I can now. . . ." and "I always. . . ." This level maintains and confirms past gains. It also can be used to reframe unpleasant experiences or to proclaim a desired state, for example, "I now know I can learn, despite disparaging remarks."

The more a learner can be guided toward positive self-talk, the greater the probability that learning will be enhanced. Just as no other person can breathe for us, so no one else can provide us with self-esteem. Therefore, by helping students to understand the benefits of positive self-talk, teachers can affect students' self-esteem and, in turn, enhance their potential for successful achievement.

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Strategies for Raising Learner Self-Esteem

If educators accept the premise that higher self-esteem can result in increased learning, then it is important to conduct learning in ways that foster a high level of self-esteem in each learner. Following are some ways to increase learner self-esteem:

Focus on the learner, rather than on subject matter.

The self-esteem of all learners — those progressing well and those underachieving — is enhanced when it is clear that persons, not skills, have the highest value. Only when content connects in a meaningful way to the life of the student does learning occur. If the learner wants to learn, then the task of the teacher is to assist the person, not merely to advance the subject matter.

If the student does not want to learn, then attacking or berating the individual does little to increase learning and reduces self-esteem severely. Caring, concern, support, encouragement, and praise need not lower standards, weaken requirements, or dilute learning goals. Helping students be all that they can be and use their abilities to the optimum increases self-worth and confidence and thus may encourage learning. Pushing for maximum subject knowledge or skill can have the opposite effect.

Provide a positive learning environment.

A learning environment should be structured to accommodate individual learning styles and to convey acceptance of experimentation and "errors" as part of learning. It should feature high expectations and challenges but low stress. While learning may follow a carefully organized and orderly course, just as often it is an untidy process. It sometimes involves confusion, trial and error, imprecise methods, and procedures that are physically, intellectually, or psychologically "messy."

What counts are progress, improvement, and growth. Alternating support and challenge while helping the learner find a way through the

maze will enhance the self-esteem of both student and teacher. An atmosphere of excitedly optimistic realism tends to raise self-worth and confidence.

Provide opportunities to help others.

It is nearly impossible to do something positive for another human being without raising one's own sense of self-worth in the process. Skillfully implemented cooperative learning approaches help to increase not only learning, but also the self-esteem of those collaborating. Assisting others pays the greatest self-enhancement dividends when there is either reciprocal assistance or expressed appreciation for the person helping. Without creating dependency or taking over for others without their approval, assisting another person increases the inside and outside positive messages for both parties.

Keeping a scoreboard of achievement and success.

It seems to be a human tendency to remember the traumatic, the painful, the embarrassing, and the difficult. The opposite must be encouraged. Every learner needs to record and review in a variety of ways (mentally, verbally, and visually) the joys, breakthroughs, moments of insight, and progress attained. This activity builds solid self-esteem that can be used to fend off the negatives of frustrations, criticisms, and other difficulties encountered during learning.

In disciplinary actions, focus on the behavior rather than on the person.

The maxim of corrective action and classroom discipline should be, "Separate the child from the act." While this often is far easier to advocate than to carry out, it is essential if correction is to be therapeutic, rather than merely punitive. Negative behavior, from mischief to violence, is a cry for help. It may be difficult to accept this in the face of hostility and maliciousness, especially if such behaviors are repeated. Yet, if protecting and enhancing self-esteem are important goals, then teachers must send a therapeutic message. "Your behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated" is a far different message from "You are a nasty (bad, malicious, deceitful) person."

Help learners set their own realistic but challenging goals.

Students also can help identify methods to achieve or progress toward the goals. The old adage that "nothing succeeds like success" has a great deal of validity. Feelings of self-assurance and capability increase when students build a track record of achievements. Whenever people "coast" or "drift" with no challenges to motivate them, feelings of apprehension and uncertainty tend to replace self-confidence.

Enthusiastic learners need to be spurred on by new, more challenging goals. Apathetic learners need to be helped to set goals that are self-motivating. And unsuccessful learners need to be re-channeled by incremental, achievable goals that can serve as a springboard to new achievement. In every case, it is essential for teachers to do everything feasible to ensure that the learners reach their goals. Accomplishment that can be measured and celebrated buoys self-esteem.

Help learners understand and recover from disappointments and thwarted expectations.

Not every goal, however carefully planned, will be achieved. To preserve and raise the self-esteem of learners when they encounter difficulties, teachers need to help their students see the problem realistically. They must help them to control the controllable and accept the uncontrollable.

Teachers also must acknowledge hurt and pain and then channel those emotions into positive motivation for new learning. It is not helpful to deny feelings or expect students to suppress their disappointments. At the very least, unacknowledged emotions can become static in the channels of learning. By the same token, emotions that run rampant choke out the ability to engage in learning. Raising students' skills in adversity management will help to preserve self-esteem in the face of negative experiences.

Encourage visualizing, mental rehearsal, and affirmations.

The field of neurolinguistic programming provides useful tools to enhance self-esteem while simultaneously increasing learning. The

more vividly and strongly a learner visualizes attaining a goal and mentally rehearses the steps to accomplish it — all the while, reviewing written and verbal statements that affirm ability to achieve and perform — the more likely that both self-esteem and achievement will increase.

Raise the self-esteem of teachers.

Teachers can — and should — use these same strategies to raise their own self-esteem. A recent book in the field of business, *The Customer Comes Second* (Rosenbluth 1992), explains that while customers (learners in education) are still the most important target group, those who attend to the customers, such as clerks and salespeople (teachers), determine how the customer is treated. Therefore, if those facilitating learning improve their view of themselves, that enhanced self-esteem and confidence will be passed on to the learners with whom they come in contact.

The better teachers feel about themselves and their abilities, the more likely that they will infuse care for their students' self-esteem into their work. That care also will likely be extended to their interactions with colleagues, parents, and community members.

ASPIRE

Another acronym may be helpful to summarize the previous information. Ellen Mauer, a Ball State University counseling psychologist, offers the ASPIRE formula to help raise the self-esteem of learners:

A = Aware. Become aware of negative self-talk, the tendency to rely on other-esteem, and the danger of allowing criticisms and errors to damage self-esteem.

S = Stop. Turn off negative self-talk. Do not rely on others to provide self-acceptance and self-confidence. Refuse to allow errors to lower self-esteem.

P = Positive. Replace all negative and pessimistic thoughts with positive, constructive, and realistic ones.

I = Imagine. Imagine success by establishing realistic goals and visualizing the desired outcomes.

R = Reward. Reward yourself and celebrate success within, as well as with others.

E = Energize. Use persistence and resilience to make the goals and positive visualization a reality.

Raising the self-esteem of a person raises not only the potential for learning, but the potential for a more fulfilling and service-oriented life.

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Helping Learners with Damaged Self-Esteem

Students who come to a learning situation with poor self-esteem are a special concern. These individuals are like human vessels from which the belief in self has been drained, and they seem incapable of raising their own feelings of self-worth or being "filled" by others. The problem, in most instances, is that a combination of experiences and messages (inside and outside) has caused these individuals to devalue themselves.

Both self-worth and confidence are critical to learning. Indeed, they unquestionably are linked in many ways. But self-worth is the more fundamental. To aid learners with damaged or low self-esteem, teachers must begin by helping them realize that they have worth simply by being alive as part of the human family. Humans are stimulated, challenged, and fulfilled by achievement, but their fundamental worth is not "earned." It exists by virtue of their existence. Self-worth is a legacy that accompanies the gift of life.

An example of this message of inherent self-worth may be conveyed by pointing out the contributions of the most physically and mentally limited persons. A person totally paralyzed from youth except for one finger can learn to communicate, interact, and with modern technology, contribute to the world, all by making appropriate use of that single functioning finger.

Closely related to inherent worth is the concept that what a person does in life is dependent on who that person is inside, not the other

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way around. Since individuals have both inherent worth and the ability to choose their feelings of self-worth, people have an unlimited capacity for self-worth. To paraphrase Virginia Satir, the family psychologist, having a positive view of one's self does not mean that we must change our skin color, sex, innate talents, or past. It is only a matter of accepting and becoming comfortable with the parts of us that already exist and then using them as best we can.

At the same time that learners are helped to awaken to their feelings of self-worth, their confidence can be increased by using the previous suggestions for preserving and enhancing self-esteem of individuals with less distorted pictures of themselves. Patience and persistence will help these students initiate positive self-talk, setting in motion successful learning experiences, celebrating progress and accomplishment, and all the other strategies can help heal wounded self-trust, uncover buried assurance, and fuel belief in ability.

Competition and Self-Esteem

Not merely winning, but being "better" than others is a dominant theme in our society. Our free-enterprise system has a competitive base, and life presents many situations in which there is only one prize, one contract, or one position available. Individually and collectively (in teams) competition is a fact of life.

This competitive environment has direct implications for learning. Many schools routinely use competitive learning activities, such as science fairs, athletic competitions, and spelling contests. Because self-esteem is closely tied to achievement (or lack of it), winning or losing can raise or lower feelings of self-worth and confidence.

Educators can help minimize the negative effects of competition on self-concept by:

Helping the learner realize that self-worth depends on engaging in the quest, *not in being the* best.

Participating or competing is, in itself, a worthwhile and noteworthy

"achievement." Special Olympics seeks to raise the self-esteem of all who participate by praising and rewarding being a part of the games, rather than placing emphasis on winning. Many non-competitive activities in school also offer opportunities for self-fulfilling accomplishment. Competition almost always should be a choice, not a requirement.

Use language that does not label.

The term "loser" should be applied only to those who shrink from a challenge of which they are capable, compete unfairly, or seek to win at the expense of others. It is vital to help persons in competition realize that the goal ought to be to win the contest, not to demean other contestants.

Structure learning activities to be primarily collaborative and non-competitive in nature.

When competition can be beneficial, it should be structured so that learners compete against a standard or set of criteria, not against other persons. When a single winner is necessary, provide as many positions of runner-up or honorable mention as possible. And give them prizes, too. Every participant should receive a certificate of participation.

Emphasize the value of competing against one's own past record, rather than against other individuals or their records.

Self-improvement should be the primary goal of educational competition.

Help learners discover and use their best talents.

Every person is endowed with a unique combination of abilities, and each can feel special by developing their specific strengths and talents. Teachers should emphasize that true self-worth is measured by how fully innate abilities and capacities are *used*.

Learning and growth are challenging, often frustrating, and sometimes discouraging. The use of competition to stimulate or increase learning must be done like petting a porcupine — very, very carefully!

Minimizing Negatives

Throughout this discussion, emphasis has been placed on identifying, recognizing, spotlighting, celebrating, and internalizing the positive aspects of learning and living, while minimizing all negative aspects. A reasonable question is, How can teachers justify emphasizing positives when students do make mistakes and do experience failure?

The answer is simply that all sensible living creatures take from their surroundings and activities that which is nourishing and avoid or discard that which is toxic or harmful.

Just as the body benefits when one eats a banana but discards the peel, or consumes an ear of corn while throwing away husks and cob, so a positive view of self is nurtured and enriched when thoughts and feelings are guided to focus on the positive and constructive. Self-esteem is intangible. But much of its cause, as well as its effect, is a matter of choosing thoughts and feelings that nourish the human psyche, rather than constrict or weaken it.

Even a monkey is smart enough to eat the banana and throw away the peel. Yet humans often "chew on the peel" of criticism, ridicule, embarrassment, failure, or other negatives, while ignoring the "fruit" of positive approaches, such as examining experiences for useful information, seeking constructive ways around or over obstacles to goals, or claiming and using zealously the skills, opportunities, and support systems that exist. Thus it is important to help students learn to throw away the peel by teaching them to focus on the positives in their lives.

Self-Esteem in the Adult Learner

When considering self-esteem and its effect on learning, the primary difference between adult learners and children or adolescents is their larger reservoir of shaping experiences. This extended "track record" may be both an advantage and a disadvantage to the adult learner.

On the positive side, adults have more data to put into self-esteem and usually more mature reasoning powers. Often, they also bring stronger desire and commitment to the learning task.

An adult's self-esteem also tends to be more fully formed and firmly established, which can be helpful or harmful, depending on how positive are the feelings of self-worth and confidence.

For adults with low self-esteem, their teachers and counselors must help them unlearn negative images and self-talk. These adults need to reframe their knowledge of themselves, a task that often requires great emotional effort.

Many adults have a low confidence in their ability to learn, especially if they have been away from formal schooling for some time. But, in many cases, they have a successful track record outside the school setting. That general sense of self-worth can be transferred to the formal learning situation. They have learned in the "classroom of life" and can be helped to internalize these "lessons of living," thus building their confidence and feelings of self-worth in the academic setting.

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The task of raising the adult's self-esteem may be a more daunting process than working with youth. However, if adults can be shown that their new learning experiences will not be reruns of previously unsuccessful or frustrating encounters, then their self-confidence as a learner may rise quickly. Early success and supportive encouragement, along with avoidance of embarrassment and strong criticism, are critical factors when striving to provide adults with a lifejacket of self-confidence in the sea of learning.

All strategies and approaches recommended to protect, maintain, and enhance self-esteem apply to persons of any age. Learning ability does not diminish with age, unless disease or illness interferes. Yet as humans age, it can be generalized that: 1) the speed or pace of learning tends to decrease with age (the older the learner, the more time needed for comprehension and mastery); 2) sight, hearing, and motor skills tend to deteriorate slightly with increasing age; and 3) physical and psychological learning conditions (climate) become increasingly important with advancing age.

The relationship of these points to self-esteem is that the adult learner may need to accommodate these conditions in order to have a successful learning experience. Because learning success affects self-esteem, as well as the other way around, self-esteem becomes perhaps even more important with adult learners than with more resilient children and teenagers.

Conclusion

Goethe wrote that the greatest evil that can befall a person is to think ill of oneself. It is essential to help learners to like themselves so that the learners believe they are capable and deserve to learn. Positive self-esteem allows leaners to cope with difficulties and to strive for new levels of excellence.

A strong belief in self comes from more than support and encouragement from others. It comes when learners focus their efforts and use their abilities to the fullest.

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George H. Reavis (1883-1970) entered the education profession after graduating from Warrensburg Missouri State Teachers College in 1906 and the University of Missouri in 1911. He went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. Dr. Reavis served as assistant superintendent of schools in Maryland and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1929 he was appointed director of instruction for the Ohio State Department of Education. But it was as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Cincinnati public schools (1939-48) that he rose to national prominence.

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